

Message Text

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SUBJECT: ATHOLIC ARCHBISHOP PROTEST CRIMINAL STATUS FOR TERRORIST
PRISONERS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

REF: LONDON 7823 (NOTAL)

1. SUMMARY. THE CATHOLIC PRIMATE OF ALL IRELAND MADE A STRONG STATEMENT DESCRIBING THE "INHUMAN" CONDITIONS OF REPUBLICAN PRISONERS CONVICTED OF TERRORIST CRIMES WHO ARE PROTESTING CRIMINAL STATUS IN NORTHERN IRELAND. HE ASKED THAT WHATEVER NEEDED BE DONE TO MAKE THE PRISONERS LIVES "TOLERABLY HUMAN." THE NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE ISSUED A "CHILLY REJOINDER" REBUTTING SOME OF THE ARCHBISHOP'S POINTS, AND INSISTING THAT THE PRISONERS' CRIMINAL STATUS WOULD NOT BE CHANGED. OTHER REACTION TO THIS "MOST INFLUENTIAL CONDEMNATION" OF THE PRISONERS' SITUATION FOLLOWS EXPECTED LINES. END SUMMARY.

2. ARCHBISHOP'S STATEMENT: ARCHBISHOP TOMAS O'FIAICH JULY 31, MADE A SECOND ALL DAY VISIT TO HIS PARISHIONERS IN THE MAZE PRISON NEAR BELFAST. ON AUGUST 1 HE GAVE THE MEDIA LONG STATEMENT MAKING THE FOLLOWING PRINCIPAL POINTS:

-- HE WAS SHOCKED AT THE "INHUMAN" CONDITIONS OF IMPRISONMENT

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FOR OVER 300 MEN. ANIMALS SHOULD NOT LIVE SO, AND THE NEAREST TO IT HE HAD SEEN WAS THE HUNDREDS OF HOMELESS PEOPLE LIVING IN SEWER PIPES IN CALCULTTA SLUMS. SOME CELLS STANK AND WERE FILTHY WITH REMAINS OF ROTTEN FOOD AND EXCRETA. THERE ARE NO BEDS, CHAIRS OR TABLES, WITH MATTRESSES (SOME WET) ON THE FLOORS, NO PERSONAL COVERING EXCEPT A TOWEL OR BLANKET, NO BOOKS OR READING MATERIAL OTHER THAN THE BIBLE, NO WRITING MATERIAL, TV,

RADIO, HOBBIES, OR EXERCISE OR RECREATION.

-- NONETHELESS, MORALE IS HIGH AND THE PRISONERS INTEND TO CONTINUE THEIR PROTEST INDEFINITELY. THEIR ATTITUDE IS DEEPLY ROOTED IN IRISH HISTORY, AND THEY KEEP THEIR SANITY BY STUDYING IRISH.

-- THEY DIFFER FROM ORDINARY CRIMINALS BY THE JUDICIARY PROCESS THAT CONDEMNED THEM AND THEIR FAMILY BACKGROUNDS. MOREOVER "THE VAST MAJORITY WERE CONVICTED ON ALLEGEDLY VOLUNTARY CONFESSIONS OBTAINED IN CIRCUMSTANCES WHICH ARE NOW PLACED UNDER RAVE SUSPICION BY THE RECENT REPORT OF AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL."

-- THE DEPRIVATION OVER A LONG PERIOD OF BASIC HUMAN NEEDS FOR PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH IS A "GRAVE INJUSTICE AND CANNOT BE JUSTIFIED." THE PROBLEM OF THE PRISONERS IS A GREAT OBSTACLE TO PEACE AND SOWS THE SEEDS OF FUTURE CONFLICT. EVERYTHING NEEDED TO MAINTAIN A NORMAL MAN'S PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH AND A "TOLERABLY HUMAN" LIFE SHOULD BE RESTORED WITHOUT DELAY.

-- THE ARCHBISHOP REPORTED NUMEROUS ALLEGATIONS OF BEETINGS, VERBAL ABUSE, AND DEGRADING SEARCHES, BUT SAID HE COULD NOT VERIFY THEM.

-- AWARE OF THE HOLY SEE'S "GRAVE CONCERN AT THE SITUATION WHICH HAS ARISEN IN THE PRISON," HE WILL REPORT HIS OBSERVATIONS.

-- THE ARCHBISHOP REPORTEDLY TOLD THE MEDIA THAT HE WAS NOT ACTING FOR THE PROVISIONAL IRA, AND THAT 80 PERCENT OF THE PRISONERS' REQUESTS SHOULD BE GRANTED IMMEDIATELY.

3. GOVERNMENT COMMENT: THE NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE QUICKLY ISSUED AN "UNUSUALLY TOUGH" (BELFAST "NEWSLETTER") STATEMENT IN RESPONSE:
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-- THE GOVERNMENT WAS "MOST SURPRISED" THE ARCHBISHOP HAD NOT REFERRED TO THE PRISONERS' RESPONSIBILITY FOR THEIR LIVING CONDITIONS

.
THEY SMEARED EXCRETA ON THE CELL WALLS AND POURED URINE OUT THE DOORS

.
ALL PRISONERS ARE ENTITLED TO VISITS, NORMAL MEALS, TOILETS AND MEDICAL CARE. AND "SIMPLY BY OBSERVING RULES" ESSENTIAL TO GOOD PRISON ADMINISTRATION, FURNITURE AND READING MATTER WILL BE RETURNED (IT WAS REMOVED WHEN BROKEN OR FOULED), AS WELL AS TV, RADIO AND OTHER RECREATIONAL FACILITIES.

-- THEY WERE CONVICTED AS CRIMINALS UNDER DUE PROCESS OF LAW AS ESTABLISHED BY PARLIAMENT. OVER 80 WERE CONVICTED OF MURDER OR

ATTEMPTED MURDER, AND ANOTHER 80-PLUS OF EXPLOSIVE OFFENSES.

-- PRISONERS' HEALTH IS WATCHED CLOSELY, AND NO ONE HAS BEEN FOUND SUFFERING FROM ANYTHING ATTRIBUTABLE TO THE PROTEST. WITHIN THE PAST TWO MONTHS ALL PRISONERS HAD BEEN MOVED OUT WHILE THEIR CELLS WERE CLEANED AND RENOVATED. MOST DIRTIED THEIR CELLS AGAIN UP RETURNING.

-- THE PROTEST HAS SERVED AS THE BASIS FOR A "ROUNDLY CONDEMNED" PROPAGANDA CAMPAIGN BY THE IRA.

-- THERE IS NO TRUTH TO THE ALLEGATIONS OF MISTREATMENT. (NOTE: AN

OUTSIDER WHO REGULARLY VISITS AND IS SYMPATHETIC TO THE PLIGHT OF THE REPUBLICAN PROTESTERS HAS FOUND NO EVIDENCE OF SERIOUS MISTREATMENT).

-- FINALLY, THE PRISONERS AND "THOSE WHO INFLUENCE THEM" SHOULD REALIZE THAT THE GOVERNMENT IS STANDING FIRM. PRISON CONDITIONS WILL RETURN TO NORMAL AS SOON AS THE PRISONERS REALIZE NO ONE "WILL BE GIVEN ANY FORM OF SPECIAL STATUS."

4. COMMENT: LOCAL REACTION WAS FORESEEABLE. THE "NEWSLETTER" (MAJORITY COMMUNITY) SAID THE ARCHBISHOP HAD "EFFECTIVELY LINED HIMSELF UP WITH THE POSITION OF THE PROVISIONAL SINN FEIN." THE "IRISH NEWS" (MINORITY) PLAINTIVELY HOPED THAT BOTH THE PRISONERS AND SECRETARY OF STATE ROY MASON WOULD COMPROMISE, BUT DOUBTED EITHER WOULD. A PROVISIONAL SINN FEIN SPOKESMAN REPORTEDLY WAS UNCLASSIFIED

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DELIGHTED, AND SAID THAT UNTIL THE ARCHBISHOP'S STATEMENT THE PROVOS HAD WRITTEN HIM OFF. IN THIS CONNECTION, WE NOTE THE SLASHING EDITORIAL IN "THE TIMES" AUGUST 2, WHICH SAYS INTER ALIA THAT "DR. O'FIAICH COULD HARDLY HAVE COMPOSED A MORE COMPREHENSIVE ENDORSEMENT OF THE PROVISIONAL IRA'S POSITION. HE SEES THEM AS THEY LIKE TO SEE THEMSELVES. HE TAKES THEM AT THEIR OWN VALUATION." BUT THE "GUARDIAN'S" PERCEPTIVE BELFAST CORRESPONDENT SAID THE ARCHBISHOP HAD "OFFERED THE MOST INFLUENTIAL CHALLENGE SO FAR GIVEN" TO THE GOVERNMENT ON THIS ISSUE (PARAS 8-9 REFTEL),.

5. THE ARCHBISHOP DID NOT ASK SPECIAL STATUS FOR THE PRISONERS, BUT HIS APPROACH SEEMS SIMILAR TO THAT OF CATHOLIC BISHOP OF DERRY DALY AND ONE OF THE PEACE PEOPLE LEADERS: SINCE THEY WERE CONVICTED UNDER EMERGENCY LEGISLATION, THEY SHOULD BE GIVEN AN EMERGENCY STATUS. MR. MASON'S NEGATIVE TO THIS APPROACH APPEARS ABSOLUTE.

6. COPIES OF THE TWO STATESMENT POUCHED TO EUR/NE AND ROME. STOUT

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